

OBJECTIVITY WITHOUT THE PHILOSOPHER'S SPECIAL OBJECTS:
A PRIORIAN PROGRAM

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The issues I wish to explore may be introduced by the following table:

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| If two objects are moving relative to each other, at least one of them is moving absolutely. | There is such an entity as Absolute Space; an object may be moving relative to it even if it is not moving relative to anything else. |
| Two objects can have in common that both of them are red. | There are universals; if two objects are red, both of them exemplify the universal redness. |
| There is a fact of the matter whether two sentences are synonymous. | There are propositions; sentences are synonymous when then they express the same proposition. |
| It is possible that there are talking donkeys. | There is a possible world in which there are talking donkeys. |
| It is objectively true that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that there is no largest prime number. | There are such entities as numbers, eternally related to one another so as to make the truths of mathematics true. |

The left-hand entry in each row gives expression to a kind objectivity; the right-hand entry affirms the existence of special kind of object. When philosophers believe in any of the entities on the right, it is typically because they think them necessary to ground the facts on the left. By the same token, when philosophers deny any of the facts on the left, it is often because they cannot bring themselves to believe in the associated kind of object on the right. My project is to explore the extent to which it is possible to have the objectivity without the objects, and my partner in the project is A.N. Prior.

The “objectivity” of which I speak is not the same thing in every case. Sometimes it is opposed to relativity, as in row 1; sometimes to conventionality, as in row 5; and sometimes to a form of nihilism, as in row 3—think of Quine’s contention that there is never a fact of the matter whether two sentences are synonymous.

Prior has views apposite to each of the rows, but in this abstract, I have space to say something only about the first three.

Substantival Space and Time. Consider Newton’s “bucket argument” for the existence of substantival space. Newton takes the depression of the water in the bucket to be an indication that the water is rotating, yet in his thought experiment the water is not moving relative to the bucket or any other material object. He concludes that there must be an immaterial entity called Absolute Space, and that the water is moving relative to *it*. But note the overlooked possibility: that motion is *really* absolute, not being relative to anything, including space itself. If this possibility is genuine—absolute motion without Absolute Space—it would be a case of objectivity without objects.¹

Though Prior does not say much about space, he advocates a form of objectivity without objects in regard to time.² He holds that there can be objective facts about the structure of time or temporal topology not grounded in time as an entity:

Instants as literal objects, or as cross-sections of a literal object, go along with the picture of ‘time’ as a literal object, a sort of snake which either eats its tail or doesn’t, either has ends or doesn’t, either is made of separate segments or isn’t; and this picture I think we must drop. (1967, p. 189)

Prior sides with Leibniz—time boils down to events (and events in turn to things). The topological facts about time (as well as competing alternative topologies) can be expressed without appeal to time as an entity by using Prior’s tense operators: the density of time as $Fp \rightarrow FFp$, the forwards infinity of time as $\sim F\sim p \rightarrow Fp$, the circularity of time as $(p \vee Pp) \rightarrow Fp$ (for any p however detailed and comprehensive), and so on (1967, chapter 4).

The idea that we can sometimes do away with an *entity* by using a certain *operator* as primitive is a motif in Prior’s philosophy. For instance, by saying ‘it was the case XX years ago that I was born’ instead of ‘my birth lies XX years in the past’, we avoid ontological commitment to events. The tradeoff here—ontology versus ideology—is explored by Sider (2011), who

¹ For an argument that generalizes to an argument against positing Absolute Space to explain absolute size, absolute orientation, or any other absolute attribute, see Van Cleve 1987, section VIII.

² I discuss this point further in Van Cleve 2011.

emphasizes that reducing ontology by expanding ideology has its costs. I argue that they are costs worth incurring.

Universals. The fact that two objects a and b “have something in common” (as we say) is often put forth as a reason for saying there are universals—entities literally shared by resembling objects. The positing of the shared entity is resisted by “ostrich nominalists” (Armstrong 1978, p. 16), who say that what is true in ‘ a and b both have the same property, redness’ is just that a and b are both red—a predicative form that makes no reference to properties as entities. Matters get trickier for the nominalist, however, when he is asked to paraphrase ‘ a and b have something in common,’ in which the something is not specified. Here, it seems, we must say ‘ $\exists F(Fa \ \& \ Fb)$.’ Are we not here quantifying over universals?

In Prior’s view, the answer is *no* (1971, chapter 3). We are indeed quantifying *into* the position of a predicate, but we are not quantifying *over* any entity. On this point, Prior’s views are at odds with Quinean orthodoxy. Quantifying into name position—passing from ‘Tom is bald’ to ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is bald})$ ’—does indeed incur ontological commitment, but that is because ‘Tom is bald’ already carries ontological commitment to an individual named by the name. But ‘Tom is bald’ carries no ontological commitment to the property of baldness by Quine’s own creed;³ therefore “ $\exists F(\text{Tom is } F)$ ” carries none, either.

Issues nonetheless remain about how Priorian quantification is to be understood. Is it a type of substitutional quantification, which many philosophers maintain is the only alternative to objectual quantification? Or is it a *sui generis* device for speaking generally, as Prior himself maintains? On this issue, I defend Prior.⁴ But if Priorian quantification is perforce substitutional, I maintain that it is nonetheless a legitimate device.

³ “That the houses and roses and sunsets are all of them red may be taken as ultimate and irreducible,” involving no entity under the name of ‘redness’ (Quine 1953, p. 10).

⁴ In Van Cleve 1994, I defended ostrich nominalism by appeal to a proposed quantifier that was neither objectual nor substitutional. I did not then realize that Prior had delineated and advocated just such a quantifier.

Propositions. Propositions have been wanted as truth-bearers, as objects of the propositional attitudes, and as things meant by sentences. Prior denies the need for propositions in any of these three capacities—without, of course, denying that many things are true, many things believed, and many things meant.

In Prior's view, 'Tom believes that p' should not be parsed as 'Tom believes / that p,' which looks like a relation between Tom and an entity denoted by a that-clause, but as 'Tom believes that / p', in which what comes to the right of the slash is a sentence and what comes to the left is a sentential operator, not a name and a relational expression (1971, chapter 2). As a general rule, Prior holds that prefixing an operator to a sentence adds no new ontological commitments to those already carried by the sentence. There are counterexamples to this thesis as stated, but I believe it is true when suitably qualified; identifying the right qualification is one of the side tasks of my paper. In any case, we have again here the trade-off between ontology and operators.

As we can quantify into predicate place without incurring commitment to universals, so we can quantify into sentence place without incurring commitment to propositions—both are acceptable forms of non-nominal quantification, and neither carries ontological commitment. If that is right, we have a way of dealing with row 3 in the table above: sentences S1 and S2 are synonymous only if $\exists p(S1 \text{ means that } p \ \& \ S2 \text{ means that } p)$, which can be true even if there are no proposition-like entities over which we are quantifying. Here as with ' $\exists F$ ', the question arises how exactly to understand the quantifier.

A theme related to "objectivity without objects" is "intensionality without intensions," which I also attribute to Prior. In (1968) 1976, he defends the thesis that there are intensional functions, but no intensional objects. The thesis is implemented in part with the law $Ipq \rightarrow I\delta p\delta q$, where 'Ipq' may be read as 'the proposition that p is the very same proposition as the proposition that q' and ' δ ' is any operator forming a sentence out of a sentence (1971, chapter 4). ('I' is not a relational expression flanking two terms, but a dyadic operator prefixed to two sentences.) If ' δ '

is replaced by ‘Tom believes that’, the law implies that if Tom believes that p without believing that q, the proposition that p is not the same as the proposition that q—even if it is necessarily true that p iff q. This makes Prior a hard intensionalist or, in contemporary terms, a hyperintensionalist, for whom necessary equivalence does not suffice for mutual substitutability. Hyperintensionalism flourishes in contemporary metaphysics, but generally only among those who countenance propositions and other Platonic entities. Nominalists tend to be extensionalists (Quine) or soft intensionalists (Lewis) at most. Once again, Prior has the right but little-recognized combination of views, or so I argue.

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